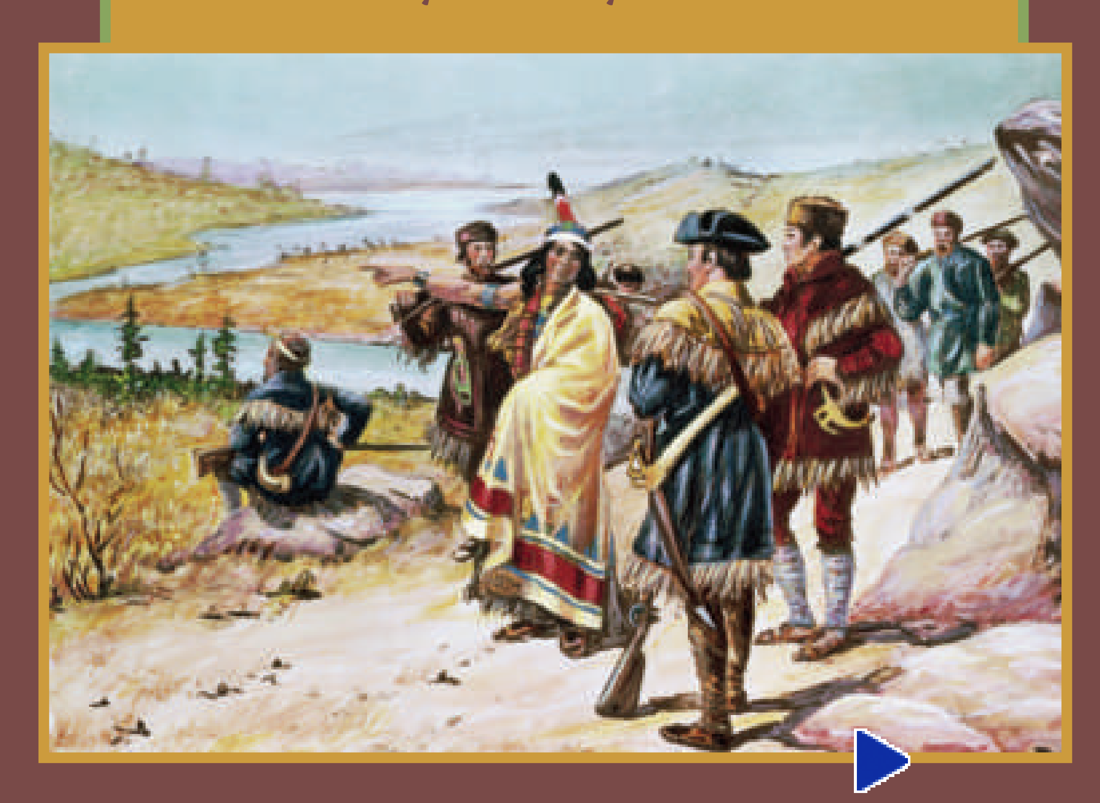


Social Studies

Talking to Lewis and Clark

by Henry Lee



Genre	Build Background	Access Content	Extend Language
Expository Nonfiction	• Lewis and Clark Exploration • Native American Languages • U. S. History	• Map • Captions • Labels	• Irregular Verbs

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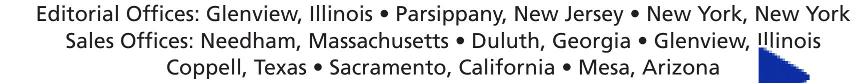


Talking to Lewis and Clark

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This map shows the route that Lewis and Clark traveled, from east (St. Louis) to west (Fort Clatsop) to explore the lands west of the Mississippi River. The names of four Native American tribes, or groups of people are shown in places where Lewis and Clark met these groups of people.



Lewis and Clark

In 1803 the United States was a growing young country. France had just sold a large territory called Louisiana to the United States. This territory was much larger than the state of Louisiana. President Thomas Jefferson yearned to know more about these lands. He sent out a team to explore the new territory. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led that team.

The team gathered near St. Louis, Missouri, in 1804. They planned to follow the Missouri River as far as it would go. On this journey they would enter lands where Native Americans had lived for many centuries. The map below shows just a few of the many Native American nations living along the banks of the Missouri River.

Lewis and Clark spoke only English. They knew that they needed help to communicate with the Native Americans. They used several ways to communicate with the Native Americans they met along the way. Many times they were successful, but other times they were not.





Plains Sign Language

The first part of Lewis and Clark's journey took them through the Great Plains where many different Native American nations lived. Each nation spoke a different language. The Native American nations living in the area traded with each other. They invented the Plains Sign Language because no person could learn all the languages of the other nations.

Plains Sign Language used signs made with the hands. Many signs were easy to understand. For example, you could cradle your arms to "say" the word *baby*. Other signs, however, were not so easy.





To sign *big* in Plains Sign Language, hold your hands closely together and slowly move your hands away from each other.



To sign the word *and*, hold your left hand open and touch your open palm with your right index finger.

Lewis and Clark were lucky to have George Drouillard (dwee YAHR) with them on their journey. George's mother was a Shawnee Native American, and he had learned Plains Sign Language from her.

When the group came upon the Shoshone (shuh SHOH nee) nation, Lewis wrote in his journal: "The means I had of communicating with these people was by way of Drouillard who understood perfectly the common language of gesturing or signs which seems to be universally understood by all the Nations we have yet seen."





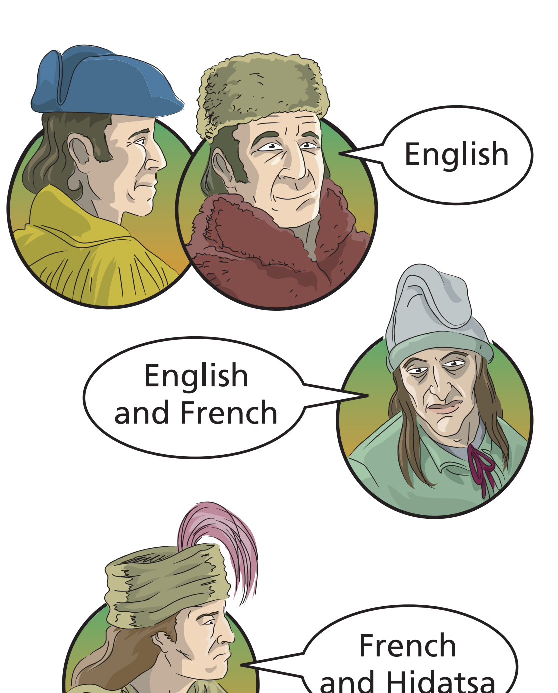
A Chain of Languages

In November of 1804, Lewis and Clark met a French Canadian named Toussaint Charbonneau (shahr boh NOH). He was a fur trader living with the Hidatsa Native Americans. Charbonneau's wife was a Shoshone Native American princess named Sacajawea.

Lewis and Clark migrated up the Missouri River, looking for the source of the river. They knew they would need help getting over the mountains. Sacajawea said that her people lived near the source of the Missouri River. Lewis and Clark hired Charbonneau as an interpreter, thinking he and Sacajawea would be helpful in Shoshone country.

source: place where a river begins

The Shoshone people helped guide Lewis and Clark over the Rocky Mountains. Later, Charbonneau and Sacajawea helped Lewis and Clark talk to the Salish Native Americans, who did not understand Plains Sign Language. Lewis and Clark's words had to be translated—from one language to another—five times so that the Salish chief could understand them. Then the chief's answer had to be translated back five times to Lewis and Clark.





Links in the Language Chain:

1. Lewis and Clark spoke in English.
2. François Labiche (lah BEESH) translated the English statements into French.
3. Toussaint Charbonneau translated the French into Hidatsa.
4. Sacajawea translated the Hidatsa into Shoshone.
5. A Shoshone boy (who lived among the Salish people) translated the Shoshone into Salish for the Chief.
6. The Chief's answer was passed back to Lewis and Clark through the same translation chain, in the other direction.

Talk About It

1. Why was it difficult for Lewis and Clark to communicate with many of the Native Americans they met?
2. What ways do people now use to talk to people who speak different languages?

Write About It

3. Some members of the Lewis and Clark expedition kept journals, or diaries, describing the people they met. Think about the Native Americans who met Lewis and Clark. How would they describe the members of the expedition? On a separate sheet of paper, write two things you think a Native American person might say about Lewis and Clark's group.

Extend Language

The past tense of **understand** is **understood**. *Native Americans who met Lewis and Clark **understood** different languages.* What is the past tense of **write**? *Lewis _______________ in his journal.*

Illustrations: 8 Derek Ring

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